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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that too little stress or stimulation can increase health risks. To determine the effectiveness of mild stimulation on the depression levels and feelings of self-worth of the elderly, 24 withdrawn nursing home residents participated in a non-judgemental 6-month art expression group. Half the group were assigned to a control condition. The experimental group met twice a week for 2 hours a day. The mild stimulus was provided by a local program known as Growth Through Art. Socialization and discussion were encouraged equally with expression through art. Pre- and post-testing of both groups with the Cattell Depression Scale and attendants' notes and anecdotal reporting showed the art activity inhibited depression, which increased significantly in the control group. Activity levels of participants in both the experimental and control groups remained about the same and there were no significant changes in self-concept. (JAC)

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INCREASED CHALLENGE WITH THE ELDERLY*

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Increased Challenge with the Elderly

ABSTRACT

Mild challenge was presented to withdrawn elderly persons in a retirement home by involving them in self-expression through art for six months. Pre- and post-testing of the experimental and control groups with the Cattell Depression Scale was used as were attendants' notes and anecdotal reporting.

Results of the activity as shown by the Depression Scale and the reports are given. Norms for the elderly were found to be below those for college students, as shown in the manual for the Depression Scale. The activity was found to inhibit increase in depression which increased significantly in the control group. Speculation was raised that the withdrawal of the advanced elderly from activity may result from physical inability, an acceptance of social stereotyping, or the disengagement which occurs as the person accepts life cessation.

"Stress, like relativity, is a scientific concept which has suffered from the mixed blessing of being too well known and too little understood" (Selye, 1980). Emphasis in the popular and technical literature has been primarily on the effects of over-stress in such work conditions as those of air traffic control, law enforcement, and business executives. Relatively little attention has been given to the effects of understress or hypo-stress, as Selye named it (Selye, 1976).

French, et al, however, found in a survey of job demands and worker health (1975) that discrepancy between the person and the environment on the negative side showed an elevation of depression which was almost equal to that which occurred with discrepancy on the positive side. They found that job dis-satisfaction was most strongly influenced by under-utilization of skills and abilities, simple and repetitive work, low participation in making decisions which affected one's work, and poor social support. Results on the obtained relationship between person and environment fit are shown in Figure 1.

Low amount of stress or stimulation also was found to increase health risks. Weiman (1977) studied 1,540 officers of a financial institution who participated in a health examination program. They also were asked a series of questions about the amount of stress they experienced on their jobs. His results are shown in Figure 2. He concluded that a combination of opposing problems

tend to result in physical distress and disease and listed those problems.

* Too much or too little to do.
* Extreme ambiguity or extreme rigidity in relation to specific tasks.
* Extreme role conflict or too little conflict.
* Extreme amount of responsibility (especially that affecting other people) or too little responsibility (Weiman, p. 120).

The results of a considerable amount of research (reviewed by Dacey, 1976) indicated that individuals have a level of stimulation which is optimum for them. Dacey called this level of stimulation the optimum drive level and formulated a concept which was in opposition to the notion of Freud that humans try to avoid stimulation whenever possible. Figure 3 pictorializes Dacey's theory.

People who have retired from active participation in the world, could be described as functioning below their optimum drive level or that which was optimum to them before reaching advanced age. The question raised in this study was whether introduction of mild stimulation in the form of participating in a non-judgmental art group would have effects of reduced depression and increased feelings of self-worth.

Method and Procedure

The staff at St. Johns Lutheran Retirement Home in Billings, Montana were asked to select 24 people who were physically able

to participate in mild physical activity but who were not participating up to their physical ability. Some were described as doing nothing but eating, sleeping, and watching television in spite of the fact that this retirement home has many ongoing activities which appeal to a variety of interests. The entire group was given the IPAT Depression Scale, developed by the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing (1976) and a brief Self Concept scale which was constructed by the investigator from a distillation of various brief forms reported in the literature. A copy of this Scale is included in the Appendix.

The IPAT Depression Scale was used after consultation with many clinical psychologists and because it was relatively brief, having only 40 items to which responses are marked on a 3-point scale of "true", "false" or "undecided". The construction of the test represented a blend of two distinct validation strategies: factor analysis and empirical keying. Reliability and validity coefficients as well as the size and representation in the normative sample were entirely adequate.

The Self Concept Scale, developed by the examiner contained only seven items and its purpose was only to obtain a measure of self concept trend as a result of the experimental condition.

As all who have tested elderly persons are aware, tests must be administered individually with ample time allowed for establishing a cooperative attitude on the part of the subject. Even

with group testing of this population, assistance may be needed to encourage completion and to answer questions.

Since norms for this age group were not available in the manual, inquiry was made of the Institute as to whether any had been published. The spokesman for the Institute stated that none had been obtained and they would like to know the results of the present testing. For this reason, the same tests were given to active retired people at St. Johns and to persons at the Senior Citizen's Center in Billings who also were active.

The original group of 24 residents were divided randomly into two separate groups, one of which became the experimental group and the other half the control group. All subjects were living in what is called the hospital section of the Home rather than in the retirement section. Groups were equated by age and sex but very quickly problems arose. Some in the experimental group were incapacitated by severe illness soon after the initial testing, and so some were recruited from the control group. Others also refused to participate and patients' rights are the rule of the Home.

The median age of the final experimental group was in the late 70's or almost 80 years, while that of the control group was in the 80's. Sex representation in each group remained matched, with two males and the rest females in each. The mild stimulus was provided by a local program known as Growth Through Art

which has been found to be extremely effective with the developmentally disabled.

Staff and materials from that program were brought to the Retirement Home and classes were held twice a week for two hours each day. Socialization and discussion were encouraged equally with expression through art. Quite early, the expression through art only became expression through arts and crafts as subjects wished to produce something which they could use as gifts to their relatives and friends.

Many also had memories of art classes in primary grades in which they remembered difficulty and believed that they were being asked to engage in childish activity. Pre- and post-testing on both the Depression Scale and the Self Concept Scale were done before and after a six-month period and administered to both the experimental and control groups. In addition, relatives of subjects in the experimental group were asked to comment on any changes, the staff at the Home were asked to define any changes in activities, and the instructors were asked to keep anecdotal reports.

Results

A total of four patients, from both groups, died during the six month period. The staff did not view this loss as unusual since five of the total number under study were in their 90's. Also, some refused to take the second tests. A record of number

of activities in which each person was involved showed little change; those who were active before continued to be active and those who were involved in few activities changed little, regardless of whether they were in the experimental or control group.

The self-concept scale, having an abbreviated range, showed no significant change from before to after the activity. Furthermore, the Scale was easily "faked" in terms of describing the self as being like everyone else. The only significant results were demonstrated on the Depression Scale. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, subjects in the experimental group changed little during the six months period while those in the control group significantly increased in feelings of depression.

(See Tables 1 & 2)

Seemingly, while the activity did not reduce depression as had been hypothesized, it did enable subjects to remain at the same level as before. For those who did not have the activity, the significant trend was toward increase in depression. As will be described in a later paper, the average retired person, whether active or withdrawn, seemed to have less depression than the average college student.

Discussion

Many problems arose with this research among which were difficulties in getting subjects to the activity even when they wanted to come. Staff time seemed to be at a premium and, since many of the people could not come without help, delay often

occurred. Furthermore, even a slight demurral on the part of a subject was sufficient to keep the person from coming. As was suggested also by the Director of the Growth Through Art program, going to this activity did not present a change in environment, which is true of the program at the Center. Certainly, the advanced age of most subjects, as well as their many physical problems, had an effect.

The relatives of the subjects who were in the experimental group spoke positively of the activity and regretted its cessation. A further study might involve subjects who stay in their homes and can be brought by relatives or agencies to either the Day Care program at St. John's or to the Growth Through Art program in the city.

The results of this study on introducing mild stimulation into the lives of elderly, withdrawn persons showed some positive results and further research should be done.

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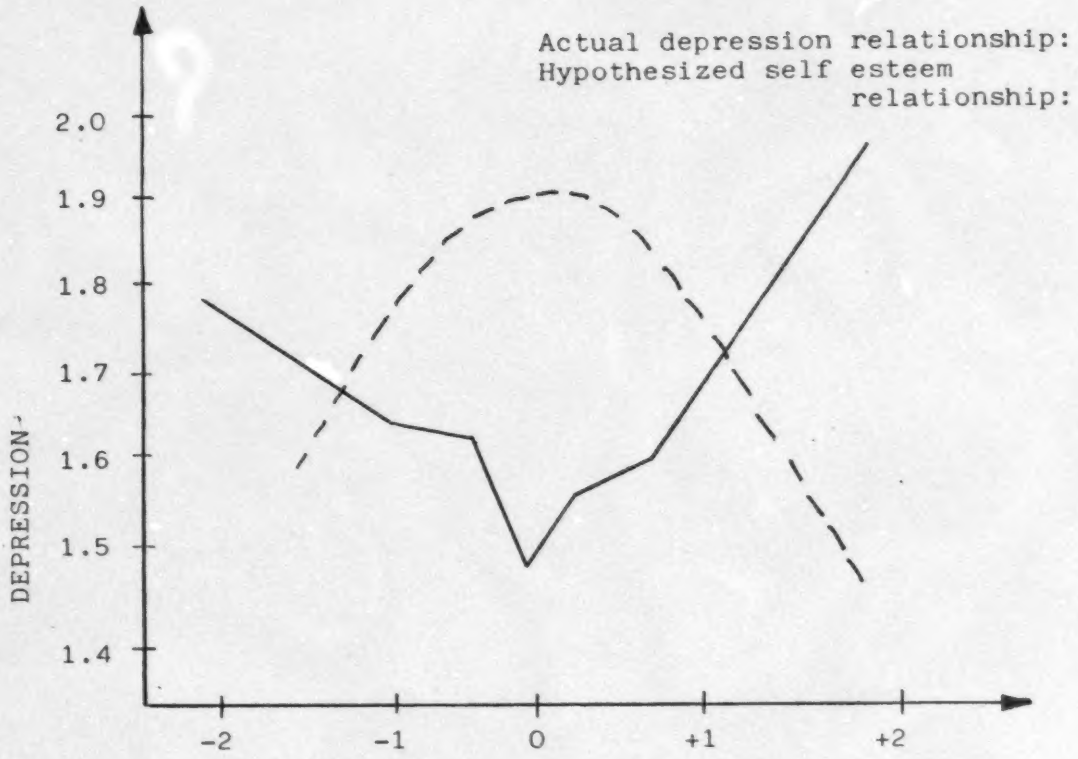
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Figure 1.



Actual relationship between Job Complexity (P-E Fit) and Depression, with hypothesized relationship of Self Esteem.

Source: French, et al., p. 91.

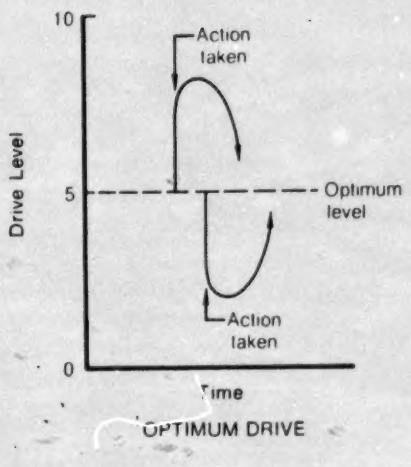
Figure 2.

Level of Stress Experienced	Number	Percent of Group	Medical Risks per Patient 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
1-13	70	45	
14-16	148	96	
17-19	314	203	
20-22	308	200	
23-25	328	213	
26-28	222	144	
29-31	115	75	
32-34	24	16	
35-37 (Excess Stress Level)	9	06	
39-40 (Excess Stress Level)	2	02	

Relationship of Stress Level to Number of Medical Risks.

Source: Weiman, 1977.

Figure 3.



Optimum Drive.

Source: Dacey, 1982

Table 1. Comparison of means on Depression Scale for experimental group before and after six months of introduced activity.

	N	M	SD	t*	
Before	15	20.33	6.25	.06	(n.s.)
After	11	20.18	6.44		

*t test for paired observations.

Table 2. Comparison of means of Depression Scale for control group before and after the same six months of no change.

	N	M	SD	t*	
Before	10	17.50	4.22	3.80	**
After	7	20.86	5.64		

*t test for paired observations.

**p .005

SELF DESCRIPTION SCALE

Please respond to the following statements by placing a check or "x" in the appropriate space. Also note that the descriptions are not always in the same place for each response. That is, you must read carefully to be sure that you are marking the correct space. Give your first reaction to each statement.

NAME_____ SEX: Female ___ Male ___

MARITAL STATUS: (please circle): Married Single Widowed Divorced

AGE: Between 65-70___ 70-80___ Over 80___

COMPARED TO OTHERS OF MY OWN AGE, I AM:

Less attractive___ More attractive___ About as attractive____

Healthier___ Less healthy___ About as healthy___

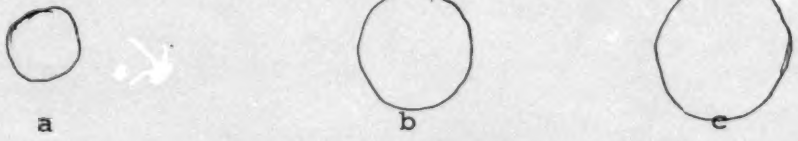
More active___ About as active___ Less active___

Less intelligent___ About as intelligent___ More intelligent___

Less social___ More social___ About as social___

More interested in world events___ About as interested___
Less interested____

When I look at my life, I would show it in terms of comparative size according to the circles given below. (Any or all choices may be used more than once. Put the latter in the space)



Past_____

Present_____

Future_____

Thank you for your cooperation